

John MacDonald

July–August 2017



WORKSHOPS

2017

OCT 8–14, 2017

HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

Greenville, New York

www.artworkshops.com

****Waiting list only****

OCT 25–27, 2017

THE LANDGROVE INN

Landgrove, VT

www.landgroveinn.com

****Waiting list only****

2018

I'm taking off 2018 from all teaching in order to focus on rewriting the workshop hand-outs, concentrate on my own painting, and even to take a workshop or two myself.

Workshops are currently being scheduled for 2019. See the [Workshop page](#) on my website for more information.

2019

SEPT 22–28, 2019

HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

Greenville, New York

www.artworkshops.com

The End

Or . . . The Art of Finishing a Painting

Around my home in western Massachusetts, there are already a few trees in which the tired greens of summer are giving way to the first touches of cadmium yellow. The hues of autumn are beginning to reveal themselves. Summer in the Berkshires is ending.

In this newsletter, we'll look at the issues and challenges of one of the most crucial stages of the painting process—The End.

Leonardo da Vince famously said, "Art is never finished, only abandoned." How true. Regardless of whether we're a beginner or superstar, we often have trouble knowing when to stop; we so easily succumb to "noodling" the painting to death. There is always one more brushstroke the painting needs. One more detail. One more touch. We're passengers on a luxury train, so enjoying the ride (oh, the painting is going so well!) we forget to get off at the station of our destination and we continue on, only to find that the train has run out of tracks and, along with our precious painting, we're flying off a cliff in a headlong rush to death and destruction on the rocks below. Oh, I know it well. I've been there so many times it's embarrassing. *If only I had stopped a few hours ago!* Unfortunately, there's no UNDO when we overwork a painting. So let's explore ways we can stop the painting process while we still have a work that is complete yet alive.

I'll apologize in advance that this newsletter has few visuals and is predominantly text. The paintings that I overworked have either been repainted or destroyed. There's no sense keeping a mediocre painting.

Sorelle Gallery Show

Opening Sept. 21, 5–8 pm

I'll be one of two artists showing at the Sorelle Gallery in New Canaan, Connecticut this autumn. There will be mostly large paintings in the show. If you're in the area, please stop by. The opening is on the evening of Sept. 21 from 5 to 8pm. Come in and say hello!

The gallery is located at 84 Main Street, New Canaan, CT.

(As I prepare to send out this newsletter, the rain is still pouring on Houston and southeastern Texas. My very best wishes to those of you who are caught up in this disaster. May you and your families be safe.)

What is an overworked painting?

It can be difficult to define exactly what makes for an overworked painting. Rather than relying solely on an intellectual evaluation of the work, I also listen to my intuition. What does the painting *feel* like? Does it feel alive or dead? It's not just about appearance. Even accomplished paintings can seem slightly overworked.

Before attempting to define the term, it's important to point out that one painter's initial block-in can be another painter's overworked disaster. Every painter has different ideas of what constitutes appropriate finish, good brushwork, or the right amount of detail. That said, here are a few characteristics which I tend to associate with an *overworked* painting:

Fussy, timid brushwork.

The brushwork lacks energy, directness, and life. Brushstrokes are uniformly small, vague, and picky.

Too much information.

Every *i* is dotted and every *t* is crossed. All details are described fully, even superfluous ones. There is little suggestiveness in any area of the painting, in any of the forms or in any of the brushstrokes. In the entire painting, everything is described at length. There are no areas of suggestiveness, simplicity, or quiet. It's all answers and no questions. There's no mystery.

Losing the message of the painting.

With so much detail, drama, and description in every corner of the painting, the focal point or focal area of the painting is lost in a blizzard of uniformly busy and monotonous noise.

Too many subtle values.

Everything is nuanced to death. This is especially noticeable in the secondary values within each primary value shape. Often, there are an equal number of value changes in every area of light and shadow.

The lack of the feeling of spontaneity. The painting appears as if every decision came out of a computer, as if the choice of each brushstroke was the result of a committee meeting: over-thought, over-discussed.

What an overworked painting *feels* like:



Painting loosely doesn't mean painting thoughtlessly. The way a painting appears isn't necessarily how it was painted. The brushwork in a painting can be full of energy, life and apparent spontaneity and yet put down slowly, with great thought and deliberation. Sargent's work often appears to have been painted in a quick burst of passionate energy. They weren't. Sargent was a slow, deliberate painter. His brushwork only *appears* to have been the work of "a moment's thought."

*A line will take us hours maybe,
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.*

—William Butler Yeats

How to avoid overworking your painting

Below are a few suggestions that can help you end the painting process with an image that will appear complete and fully-realized and yet still fresh and lively:

DELETE THE PAINTING IN THE MIND. If you have a preconceived idea of what you want the finished painting to look like, get rid of it. Judge the painting on its own merits, not by an image in your head that may no longer apply to what's on the easel. Be open to the simple fact that if a painting has a strong composition, effective value structure, and solid color and edge relationships, it will require fewer details than you expect. It's likely that the painting will be finished long before you think it will be.

PAINT CONFIDENTLY. I admit to feeling more than a little hypocritical in adding this important point because I'm not a confident painter. Far too often I second guess my choices and dab and dot with my brush. It's something I'm still learning to avoid. Meanwhile. . . sometimes it can help to put down a brushstroke and leave it. Don't touch it. Don't fiddle with it. Even Inness, with all his glazes, smears, brushwork, scumbles, scrapings, etc., painted with confidence. It's a trait that can be learned.

SLOW DOWN. As the painting approaches completion, step back to judge the work after each brushstroke or two. Don't allow the energy of painting, the joy of working on a successful painting, or the mere fact that you have time to paint, to blind you to the current state of the painting. With each brushstroke, ask yourself if it's needed. When a painting is nearing completion, each additional mark will either help the painting or hurt it. If the mark you just made didn't help the painting, wipe it off. Simply slowing down and spending more time thinking can make an enormous difference.

RETHINK THE WORD *FINISH*. The word "finish" too often implies "perfect." There's no such thing as a perfectly completed painting. You may find it more helpful to use the phrase "ready to show." A painting can be ready to show to others long before we think it's finished. And we've all had the experience of showing a work in progress to others only to be told, "*Don't touch it! It's finished!*" It's not at all unusual for those with fresh eyes to see a painting as complete long before we do.

STOP. NOW! **If you don't know what the painting needs, you need to stop.** With 3 million possible color choices, randomly mixing pigments and throwing one on the canvas in the blind hope it'll work is both hopeless and destructive. Let the painting sit and ferment—for a year or more if need be—until you can see it with fresh eyes, until you *know* what the painting needs. Don't paint in a panic. It never works.

FRAME IT. *Slowing down* and *Framing* my work have become the two most effective ways in which I control the finishing of a painting. After every painting session, regardless of the state of the painting, I frame it. It's amazing often a painting that I assumed to be far from a finished state proves instead to be nearly complete. Simply by seeing the work in a frame. Let's look more closely at why this works so well.

(A thank you to Curt Hanson for offering several of these suggestions.)

Using frames to avoid overworking a painting.

The two most helpful techniques that keep me from overworking a painting are *slowing down* and *framing the work*. It continually amazes me (and workshop participants) how often a painting, when seen in a frame, suddenly appears to be much closer to a finished state than expected. I've concluded there are two reasons this works so well, one visual and the other psychological.

(In the example below is a painting on the easel in my studio and nearing completion. It will be in the September show at the Sorelle Gallery.)



Visual effect. When working on a painting, our minds can separate the painting from the objects in the background of our studio but our eyes cannot. To our eyes, everything in the field of vision is visual information. The objects in the background are shapes of color and value and are as visually appealing as the shapes of color and value on the canvas. And where the background shapes directly abut the canvas, their colors and values will affect those in the painting. It's a visual cacophony. It's even worse when we have other paintings in the background that call to our attention. How can we possibly judge the painting when so much extraneous visual information is shouting out to us from outside the boundary of the painting?

Putting a frame around the painting separates those two disparate worlds of information. It is much easier to see, and judge, a painting when a buffer zone surrounds and separates the painting from the useless, visual background noise.

Psychological effect. We naturally assume that framed paintings in a gallery or a museum are finished. We're deeply psychologically conditioned to believe that a *framed* painting is a *finished* painting. We can use that conditioning to our advantage when judging the state of our paintings.

In the studio, framing even a clearly unfinished painting will force us to look at it differently, to see it with fresh eyes. We can then consider the possibility that the work is finished. And if you wish to enhance the effect, place the framed painting on a wall in your home. In a frame and out of the studio environment, the painting will say "I'm finished!" And the painting may be right.



TIP: Framing a wet painting.

If you want to try the framing technique, you'll need to put a wet painting in a frame. How can this be done without leaving paint on the frame or a smeared ridge of paint around the edge of the canvas? Here's an easy technique. Purchase sheets of automobile gasket material at any auto supply shop. They typically come in sheets about 5" square and are approximately 1/16" in thickness. Using an X-Acto knife or razor blade, cut the sheets into 1/8"–1/4" squares. Laying the frame face down, place a small square in each corner and gently place the painting within the frame. Secure the painting in the frame, put it on your easel under good lighting and it's ready for viewing.



*The framing clips (shown right) can be purchased from the American Frame Company. See below.

Keeping a set of studio-only frames.

The frames I use for looking at a painting that is still in progress are “studio frames”—those that have become dented, scratched, or out of style. Almost any frame will do for the initial evaluation of the state of the painting. Then as the painting nears completion, you may wish to choose a frame color and style that will best fit the work. It's helpful to have a variety of frames in different sizes and styles. There are inexpensive frames available online or in craft stores. Another good source is a yard or garage sale. For a few bucks you may sometimes get a tacky piece of art but also a good frame!



Whether ornate or simple, a frame can help us judge the state of the painting. But as the work nears completion, it's helpful to pick a frame that shows the painting in the best light.

And lastly, speaking of frames. . .

Putting the right frame on a painting can greatly enhance (or detract from) its appearance. Framing is itself an art and I don't pretend to be skilled at it. But below are some thoughts, suggestions, and resources for framing your work.

How important is the quality of the frame? Most galleries and collectors are more concerned about a frame that is undamaged, well constructed, and that makes the painting look its best. Interestingly, most of my galleries have told me not to bother using the most expensive frames for the simple reason that many buyers will reframe the painting after purchasing it. So I usually buy moderately priced frames—under \$100 for small paintings, under \$300 for large work. Again, it's the appearance that most matters.

Width.

2" or smaller: appropriate for paintings 9" x 12" or smaller. Too thin for 12" x 16" or larger.

3" frame: appropriate for 16" x 20" paintings or smaller.

3.5"–4" frame: appropriate for paintings larger than 16" x 20," up to 24" x 36."

4.5"–5" frame: appropriate for paintings larger than 24" x 36."

Color. (These are just general suggestions that may, or may not, apply to your painting.)

Gold works well on autumn scenes or warm key paintings. Can overwhelm muted-color paintings.

Silver works well on many paintings, especially with spring or summer greens and some snow scenes.

Black (with gold inner edge). For years, my favorite style. Can be a bit too dark with low key paintings.



Photos courtesy of Artframes.com

Frame Sources:

ArtFrames.com (<http://www.artframes.com/catalog1.html>)

Nineteen styles. I prefer the Laguna, both the Gold and Dark Espresso, and the Wachtel and Wyeth in silver. Their customer service is excellent. Artframes will make custom sizes of any plain air style frame.

Kingofframe.com (http://www.kingofframe.com/readymade-frames_c_7.html)

Thirty-five styles. Of these, I like the Craftsman and Arroyo, but have used and liked the Laredo (black and gold) and the Saratoga (black w/ gold). They, too, have very good customer service.

Picture Hanging Hardware:

American Frame Company: www.americanframe.com

For clips, screws, and thin wire for small paintings.

Picture Hang Solutions: www.govart.com

For heavy wire and hooks for large paintings. (HWR-709C, HWR-707C, BOX-740-6, HWR-129-BC)

The Non-Toxic Studio: Replacing Cadmium Yellow

It's not difficult to find methods or materials that allow us to rid the studio of solvents. (See the March-April 2016 newsletter). Replacing pigments, however, can be trickier. Sometimes the pigments of non-toxic substitutes lack the quality or characteristics that make their deadly cousins so desirable. Finding an adequate substitute for the beautiful and versatile range of cadmiums can be particularly difficult.

Utrecht's **Cadmium Yellow Light (Pure)**[PY37] is the only toxic pigment in my limited palette. Finding a substitute for it hasn't been easy. An online search turned up several suggested pigments but none were close enough to the color to make switching easy. It was immediately apparent that there was no single, commercially available pigment that would adequately replace cad yellow light. I had no choice but to create a mixture. After some experimentation, I found one that is nearly indistinguishable in hue from cadmium yellow and yet is completely non-toxic. It's a mixture of Winsor & Newton "Winsor Yellow" [PY74] and Winsor & Newton "Indian Yellow" [PY139+PR101], in a ratio of approximately 1 part Winsor Yellow to 2/3 part Indian Yellow. When mixing the paints, I put a small amount of cadmium on my palette and use it as a guide. If my mixture is too, I add more Winsor Yellow. If too lemony, I add more Indian Yellow. Although the hue can be a nearly perfect match, the resulting mixture does differ from pure cadmium in four ways: it is very slightly less saturated, it has a bit more transparency, it has slightly less tinting strength, and the paint film dries more quickly. But all of these differences are so subtle that I've neither had to change the way I paint nor have I noticed any difference in the results on the canvas. It's a perfectly adequate substitute and as soon as I exhaust my supplies of cadmium yellow, I'll use it exclusively.

Winsor & Newton "Winsor Yellow:"

PY74 = Arylide Yellow 5GX, more commonly known as **Hansa Yellow**.

Winsor & Newton "Indian Yellow:"

PY139 = Isoindoline Yellow. A transparent, lightfast yellow orange.

PR101 = Synthetic Iron Oxide Red. One of the most commonly used pigments in a range of hues.



Above: using a dab of Cadmium Yellow Light as a guide, I add the two yellows in about a 3:2 ratio and adjust the mixture as needed.

Right: The two colors are nearly indistinguishable. (The Cadmium Yellow Light is on the left.) Because of the limitations of computers and monitors, it's unlikely you're seeing the actual hue but it's the comparison that's important—they're nearly identical.



Forget brands—think chemistry.

Why use the numbers PY74, PY139, PR101? (Technically, the Color Index.) Does an artist need to pay attention to them? It depends. For some pigments, such as the cadmiums, the ingredient is in the name and the names run consistently across brands. But for others, different brands use a different name for the same pigment or, just as confusing, the same name for different pigments. For instance, below are the variety of pigments used in a few brands of what the manufacturers call Indian Yellow:

Winsor & Newton: PY139 + PR101

Williamsburg, Gamblin, and Daniel Smith: PY83

Utrecht: PY153 + PR101

Old Holland: PY95 + PY129

And it's not only the uncommonly named paints such as Indian Yellow that can vary. From brand to brand, almost any color can vary in hue, saturation, or value. Names can't be trusted. Consequently, I use the the Color Index number for two reasons. First, to learn about the chemical properties of a pigment: is it lightfast, toxic, or transparent? Secondly, I use it when shopping for a specific color from a different brand. For example, if I wanted to try Old Holland's Hansa Yellow, I wouldn't find it. They don't sell a "Hansa Yellow." But by using the Color Index number, I discover they offer a PY74 pigment (Hansa Yellow) under the unpronounceable name of Scheveningen Yellow Light. It's the same paint. So use the Color Index numbers to find a specific hue. They're always more reliable than labels.

Below are links to sites that offer a treasure trove of information regarding artist pigments:

<http://paintmaking.com/pigments.htm>

http://www.artiscreation.com/Color_index_names.html#

<http://www.handprint.com/HP/WCL/waterfs.html> (describes watercolors but informative)

Back to the original question: must an artist pay attention to these numbers? It can be helpful. But remember: the chemistry of our pigments will determine the properties of our paintings but not the quality. A great painting is the result of many factors, the most important being the composition, the value structure, color relationships etc. The chemistry of the pigments we use is the least of them.

Words of Wisdom

“Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just show up and get to work. If you wait around for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightening to strike you in the brain, you are not going to make an awful lot of work. All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself.”

-Chuck Close

“Look at that beautiful sunset!”

-George Inness

The last words of Inness. Seconds later, he died of a stroke. He was vacationing in Scotland. (Contributed by Ed O'Brien.)

Happy Autumn!

I hope each of you had a successful summer. No matter where you live, enjoy the change of the seasons and the slow transformation of nature's palette. And, as always. . .

Happy Painting!

